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THE DIFFERENTIATION OF THE ROMAN AND GREEK CATHOLIC VIEWS OF THE FUTURE LIFE

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The early Christian hope of the speedy return of Christ and the end of the world in its realistic form gradually died out. It had supplied a stimulus to some of the most heroic deeds that men have ever performed and had been maintained in the face of contradiction with a tenacity that proved its great moral power. For in those days it was more than a theory—it was a faith. The failure and ultimate abandonment of these expectations looks like one of the tragedies of history. It is true that some continued to cling to it after it had ceased to affect the mass of Christians. It is true that from time to time there came fitful revivals of the ancient hope, but its rapid subsidence in every instance proved that though the creeds might reiterate the language of the primitive faith, it no longer constituted the motive power of the Christian life.

The transition to another view of the world was accomplished through dangers that threatened to overwhelm the young faith or to leave it hopelessly entangled with alien religions and confusing speculations. The story of the conflict with Gnosticism and neo-Platonism proves this. The resulting confusion of ideas was particularly manifest in the views that came to be held of the future life. We may discover, perhaps, in the apparent chaos two main currents of influence, namely, the work of the philosophic spirit as it strove to unify the mass of beliefs and hopes of common Christians and to relate them harmoniously with the prevailing scientific modes of thought, and, along with this, the popular identification of the realistic symbols of Christian faith with the faith itself. The latter is the more manifest influence, if not the more powerful. Consequently we shall not be surprised if we find that although the course of events gradually extinguished the interest in the imminence of the Parousia, the Antichrist, the

millenium,¹ and the two resurrections, the moral vigor of the faith still found the physical resurrection, the literal judgment, the end of the world, and a literal heaven and hell indispensable. The philosophic movement affected the smaller number of people, but these were the leaders of thought and, in a measure, of ecclesiastical affairs, and hence in the end it was bound to permeate the entire Catholic church.

Throughout this movement Origen's speculative interpretation of Christianity was in control. For although his contradiction of the traditional doctrine of the future, and especially his restorationism, made it necessary that at length he be regarded and officially treated as a heretic,² yet it was necessary to adopt his philosophic attitude and method because it supplied the church with a theoretical basis for the control of the life of the people.

However, Origen's philosophy of the Christian religion had a significance far beyond the specific doctrines he taught and the method by which he developed them. It signaled in general the transition of Christian interest from a simple, unsophisticated devotion to extra-earthly aims and an expectation of deliverance from earthly ills to the prosecution of a secular task—a task that meant nothing less than the remolding of all earthly conditions and activities by permeating them with the Christian spirit. For this was really the work the church attempted. This revolution was virtually accepted by the seventh century. It had a theoretical and a practical side. On the theoretical side there was the marriage of Christian faith with secular science. Origen, more than anyone else, taught the church to express its beliefs in the terms of the current philosophy. Notwithstanding the evident opposition between his theories and the teaching of the Christian Scriptures, by the alchemy of his allegorism the church teachers were able to smoothe over the contradiction and merge the one in the other. In the writings of Jerome, Gregory the Great, and the mediaeval theologians this allegorism was carried to the wildest extravagance, so that the Scriptures were made to teach whatever might be required.

¹ Apollinaris of Laodicia is the last representative of the early view in the East, and Lactantius the last important representative in the West.

² Mansi, *De Consil.*, ix, 399, 491–518.

On the practical side the revolution meant the attempt to bring all secular affairs, from the simple life of the home to the complex affairs of imperial government, under the control of the Christian church. The greatness of the change that was in progress was suddenly shown in the conversion of Constantine, but it was actively in progress long before. In short, the attention of Christians was turned from an approaching catastrophic *deliverance* from the world to the work of subjugating and *governing* it. Consequently the doctrine of the future, like all other doctrines, was shaped in accordance with the church's aims; it was made tributary to the business of the present. Here again Origen was the mediator.

The theoretical problem claims our attention first and briefly. It appealed to the Greek-oriental spirit, which gave itself to the mystical, speculative view of things. The East tried to look through and beyond the imagery of the material world to the realities of the spiritual and eternal. The exact determination of truth was conceived to be necessary for its own sake. That a view of the future life should serve a present practical need was no guaranty of its truth. Illumination of the mind, immediate knowledge of reality, was the main thing. For the East, therefore, the future life was not so much a new state to be entered on at the close of the present material state (although it must be this for the minds of the great majority) as it was the perfection of spiritual illumination, the incorruption of which the human soul begins to partake in this life. The future becomes the fulfilment of the present.

The full import of this view of things for those times cannot be discerned apart from a knowledge of the "Origenistic controversies," the christological and trinitarian disputes, that agitated the Christian world for four hundred years. The calling of great ecumenical councils of the church, the fierceness of their debates, the bitterness of their conflicts, cannot be wholly explained by reference to political interests. To the minds of the partisans in those struggles the very essence of Christianity was at stake. Two main questions were argued: first, whether it was the very essence of Deity that came into the world in Christ; second, how this essential Deity was united to humanity in Christ.

The first of these questions was agitated first in the famous Arian controversy and furnishes the clue to the whole movement. It is impossible to enter into details here, but the substance of the "orthodox" contentions may be briefly stated thus: The Christian religion brings salvation; salvation is ultimately deification, the spiritualization and elevation of man's nature to the realm of the divine, where God is immediately known and possessed; human nature is the lower, the earthly, the undivine; it can be saved only through essential union with the divine; hence the Savior of men must be one who possesses essential deity and unites with it in himself essential humanity. The point to be noticed here is that this whole theological development and the dogmas which it produced sprang out of the philosophical view of man's final state which Origen represented. The fruit of his theology was a new orthodoxy to be placed alongside the traditional orthodoxy and, if possible, to absorb it.

The eschatological inferences to be drawn from this system of thought are important. If Christ united human nature with the divine in himself, then human nature, wherever and in whomsoever it may exist, is saved. Since this does not occur instantaneously, it must be conceived as a gradual process begun here and now and completed hereafter. If this process of divinization³ or illumination or purification—for they all amount to the same—is imparted through mystical experiences or ceremonies, as everybody believed, then these matters become the chief present concern. With this view of things it was natural that the eastern church should become the church of mystical cults.

While Origen drew from his premises the logical conclusion that all are to be saved ultimately, the church councils could not admit it, for two reasons: First, it contradicted the traditional doctrine of a dual destiny for men, and second, it nullified in the end the universal belief of eastern Christians in the freedom of the will. Similarly, other natural results of his theology, the denial of a real resurrection of the body, of the second coming of Christ, and of a final judgment day, could not be allowed in the face of tradition.

³ The words of Irenaeus are: *Dei facti sumus* (*Contra Haer.* IV. xxxviii. 4); *sublevat in vitam Dei* (*ibid.* V. ix. 2). Similar phraseology became common.

Hence it was necessary to insert in the creeds, alongside the dogmas of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, of the coequality of three divine persons in one divine essence, and of the duality of natures in Christ, a reaffirmation of the traditional doctrines of last things. Thus, in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed (380 A.D.) we read: "[Jesus Christ] shall come again with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end." It is noteworthy that the doctrine of eternal punishment is not asserted in this creed. It appears in unmistakable terms in the Athanasian creed which sums up the Nicene theology.⁴ But this creed was never adopted by the eastern church⁵ and represents more distinctly the Roman view.

Of course there was opposition in the East to Origenism. His theory of the pre-existence of all souls and of their final restitution (the Apocatastasis) especially were combated by Methodius,⁶ Epiphanius,⁷ many others of less note and were never formally accepted by the eastern church. But Origenism in its essence pervaded the East. Athanasius,⁸ Basil the Great,⁹ his brother Gregory of Nyssa,¹⁰ and Gregory Nazianzen¹¹ developed and defended it. The old eschatology falls mostly out of view. Millenarianism is distinctly repudiated as a carnal hope. The idea of the resurrection almost alone receives favorable consideration and that only apologetically. From Gregory Nazianzen's florid rhetoric very little can be gathered with certainty. Gregory of Nyssa¹² supports it as against transmigration and the Platonic soul-rotation. But for him "the resurrection is the reconstitution of our nature in its original form." Though it is posited as necessary to that end, all he seems to mean is that the better attributes of the soul, all that makes it an image of Deity, reappear. It is only as *mind* he considers man to be in the image of God.

The eschatology of the eastern church stops at this point. It lost its grip on moral truth and became morally inert. It became

⁴ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, II.

⁶ Cf. in *Oratio de Resur.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, II, p. 70, note 2.

⁷ *Haer.* 64.

⁸ *Adv. Gentes*, *Apol. contra Arianos*, and many other works.

⁹ *De Spiritu Sancto* 29, 73; *In Hexaemeron*; *Adv. Eunomium*, et al.

¹⁰ *Contra Eunomium*.

¹¹ *Orat. Theol.*, et al.

¹² *De Anima et Resur.*; *De Virginitate* xii, xiii; *De Hom. Opif.* 17.

the church of mystic rites and of the ascetic life. It developed a cult of the dead. And naturally enough. For if men on earth participate in Deity, surely when they have laid aside the material body and have risen nearer to the perfect deification of their souls they may participate in the worship accorded to Deity.

Not only so, but since the present and the future life were inwardly one and since the purification begun on earth continued after death, it was easy to assume that the dead are helped by the suffrages of the living and the living by the intercessions of the dead. The Eucharist received a special development in this direction. It became both a participation in the deified humanity of Christ and also a sacrifice for the dead. The trend in this direction was not unopposed. About the middle of the fourth century, Aërius, presbyter of Sebaste, led a determined, though unavailing, protest against it. Cyril of Jerusalem apparently refers to this protest when he says:¹³ "For I know many say, What is a soul profited when he departs from this world, either with sins or without them, if it be commemorated in prayer?" He answers by saying, "When we offer to him [God] our supplications for those who have fallen asleep, though they be sinners we offer up Christ sacrificed for our sins, propitiating our merciful God for them as well as for ourselves." Aërius was also answered by the famous Epiphanius,¹⁴ of Salamis. In this matter the eastern and western churches agreed.

We turn now to the western church. Its differentiation from the eastern church began in early times and became more and more marked with the growing recognition of the leadership of the church at Rome. It was characterized by a more vigorous moral tone. It took little interest in speculation and whatever appeared was mostly borrowed from the East or was trivial in itself. It fell heir to the practical temper of the Roman people. It gave itself to the task of propagating and enforcing the faith. The church was the depository of the faith. Acceptance of the faith and obedience to the church were one and the same. Theology and the dogmas it produced were turned into a means of supporting the church's administration. The doctrine of the future life became

¹³ *Lect.* xxiii. 10.

¹⁴ *Haer.* 75. 7.

the chief instrument for the enforcement of the church's professions. It claimed to minister salvation. Therefore it must assume some control over the destinies of men even after death. For this claim the Origenistic theology was indispensable.

The West accepted the eastern orthodox doctrine of the god-head and of the person of Christ and the idea that salvation is by progressive purification. The former became a fixed dogma. The latter received a great development. Its most noteworthy product is the doctrine of purgatory.

As long as the Parousia was looked on as imminent, little attention was given to the state of believers in the brief interval after death. If all had felt, like Paul, that to depart was to be immediately with Christ, the question could not have arisen, for both the physical resurrection and the intermediate state would have been excluded. It was the belief in the immortality of the soul along with the retention of the belief in the resurrection¹⁵ that gave this matter its prominence. When there was added the belief that salvation is a process of purification begun here and continued after death, it became a source of great anxiety—especially so when it began to be surmised that the purification might be incomplete at the judgment day.

The high idealism of the early Christians left no room for such anxiety, for to them the Christian life was the sin-free life. Their clear, stern moral convictions intensified their inherited belief in the absolute sundering of men at the judgment. This latter belief continued in the ancient Catholic church¹⁶—though some theologians lapsed¹⁷ from it at times—and was the official doctrine.¹⁸ Even the Athanasian creed,¹⁹ though comparatively late, makes no mention of an intermediate purificatory state.

Yet the idea of a purgatorial process after death was making progress all the while. Something of the sort seemed to be necessary.

¹⁵ It is certain, however, that many Christians doubted the resurrection. See the defense of it by Augustine. *De Fide et Symbolo* 23, 24; *De Catech. Rud.* 27, 54. *De Civ. Dei* xxii. 11-21; Jerome *Ep.* lxxxiv. 5.

¹⁶ Cyprian *Ep.* lii. 17, but cf. 20.

¹⁷ See especially Hilary *De Trin.* vi. 3; *Tract. in Ps. LII.* 17, lxix. 3.

¹⁸ Jerome *Ep.* cxxiv; Hilary *Tract. in Ps. I.* 17-19, lvii. 3, 5. Chrys. *Ep. ad Theod.* I. 10-13.

¹⁹ Schaff, *op. cit.*, II.

The well-nigh universal belief that baptism washed away sins and that it could not be repeated, the evident failure of most Christians to live a sinless life after baptism, and the consequent postponement of the sacrament (as the Romans called it) to the latest possible time of life lest the soul be lost through post-baptismal sins, led inevitably either to the lowering of the moral standard or to the hope that these sins might be expiated after death, or to both. Even the Montanist movement, in spite of its protest against the laxity of Christian morals in the third century, was forced to compromise by making the fatal distinction between mortal and venial sins—sins that could not be expiated by suffering and those that could—and actually led the church to make this distinction a basis for discipline. In the bitter Novatianist and Donatist controversies over those who had lapsed during the persecutions the laxer view prevailed. It became imperative, therefore, if morality was not to be abandoned, that the church affirm that the guilt of post-baptismal sins be expiated, if not in this life, then after death. This post-mortem expiation could not be assigned to the sufferings of hell without invalidating baptism. Hence these sins must be expiated in some other place. Further, since the Christian moral consciousness still insisted on a final judgment for all at the end of the world, this expiation must take place, if at all, before that event.

This trend was confirmed by other influences. Offerings for the dead were not unknown among the Jews,²⁰ and the early Christians may have followed them. Prayers for the dead are found in liturgies²¹ that apparently date from the beginning of the third century. We have seen that the sacrifice of the Eucharist and prayers for the dead were customary in the eastern church. Aërius was counted a heretic for his opposition. If baptism for the dead²² was not practiced by some early Christians, the high merit of martyrdom²³ was soon regarded at any rate as an equivalent.

²⁰ II Macc. 12:43-45.

²¹ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Eng. trans., VII, 536 ff. Ambrose *De Excessu fratris Satyri* 80; cf. I Cor. 3:15 (Migue 17, col. 200); Apoc. 20:6; 21:14 (Migue 17, cols. 934, 950), *et al.*

²² But see I Cor. 15:29; Tertullian *De Resur.* xlvi; Aug. *De Civ. Dei* xxi. 24.

²³ See the baptism of blood, Tert. *Scorp.* vi.

The yearnings of affection and the belief that fellowship was not destroyed by death were confirmed by the belief that the living and the dead might mutually share acquired merits.²⁴ While the synods and councils of the Nicene period do not pronounce upon these matters, it is very significant that this development received no official check. For these things must have been well known.

The fact is, private opinion in favor of a purgatory for departed believers was making headway steadily for four centuries before a bishop of Rome pronounced it an article of faith. Hermas²⁴ speaks of a purification by tortures. Irenaeus²⁵ alludes to a purificatory discipline of departed saints to prepare them for incorruption. Tertullian²⁶ affirms that "the soul undergoes in Hades some compensatory discipline, without prejudice to the full process of the resurrection, when the recompense will be administered through the flesh besides." Hilary²⁷ of Poitiers and Ambrose²⁸ of Milan indorsed the idea of a purgatory. Augustine²⁹ suggested that there were secret receptacles for souls that were there treated according to their actions in the flesh. Notwithstanding his general view that there are only two places for souls after death, he reacted against the dualism of Pelagius on this point, held that after re-embodiment men receive an accession of joy or suffering, admitted that purgatorial suffering is a possibility, and held that venial sins may thus be expiated. This is, of course, out of keeping with his doctrine of predestination. The speculations of Augustine about a purgatory probably contributed a good deal to the further development of the idea.

The question of the condition of the Old Testament saints prior to the judgment day had also some influence. Since they had not been baptized they could not be in the pure presence of God. Yet it was not possible that they were to be forever in hell. From

²⁴ Gregory the Great *Dial.* IV. xxxix; also IV. lv: "Si culpa post mortem insolubiles non sunt, multum solet animas etiam post mortem sacra oblatio hostiae salutaris adjuvare, ita ut nonnunquam ipsae defunctorum animae expitere videantur"; Aug. *Enchir.* 70.

²⁴ *Pastor Vis* I, iii. 7.

²⁵ *Contra Haer.* v. 35, 36.

²⁶ *De Anima* lviii. The words are, *modicum delictum illic luendum*.

²⁷ *Tract. in. Ps. CXVIII*.

²⁸ *De Spiritu Sancto* i. 170. The statement is not clear.

²⁹ *Enchir.* 69; *De Civ. Dei* xx. 25; xxi. 12-16.

early times there was a tradition that Jesus after his death had descended to Hades and preached the gospel to the spirits of the dead. It soon became matter of common belief that he had drawn after him the souls of those ancient worthies and placed them in Paradise where the soul of the repentant thief had gone. On the other hand, it was impossible to regard them as in heaven, where God is, for this would overthrow the doctrine of the resurrection and judgment at the end of the world.

Thus the popular Christian imagination united with the Origenistic speculations in slowly compelling the church leaders to formulate at least tentative statements regarding the future state of all mankind. They could no longer say that men went either to heaven or to hell. A great number must be in neither. Again, this intermediate state must be subdivided, a portion of it (Paradise) containing the pure disembodied souls and another portion containing the imperfectly righteous, whose sinful stains must needs be removed ere they can enter the Paradise of the saved.

It was the great Roman pope, Gregory the First, who was the first to give official recognition to this superstition. He was either an extremely superstitious man himself or else freely used the superstition of others for the ends of papal statesmanship. What was heretofore a mere private opinion he turned into an article of faith.³⁰ To be sure, he was somewhat cautious and allowed a purgatory instead of hell only for the lighter sins,³¹ such as idle talk and immoderate laughter (basing his view on I Cor 3:13). But since he also held that spirits in the shape of men on earth expiated their sins by suffering, the sluice-gates were fairly opened for sinners to pour into purgatory.

Though many noted teachers of the church after him made no recognition of the doctrine, and though many centuries passed before a council of the whole church declared it a dogma to be believed on pain of damnation, from his time onward it became a working doctrine of the Roman church.

³⁰ *Dial.* IV. xxxix. The words are: *De quibusdam levibus culpis esse ante iudicium purgatorius ignis credendus est.* He and others commonly referred to Matt. 5:26; 12:31. See also *Moral.* ix. 34.

³¹ *Hoc de parvis minimisque peccatis posse fieri credendum est.*